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We Believe Her:

Sexual Assault and Friend/Ally/ship in *Exit, pursued by a bear*

E. K. Johnson's young adult novel *Exit, pursued by a bear* (2016) offers a useful case study for examining intersections of gender, identity, sexual trauma, allyship, and young adult literature (YAL). Unlike much YAL that addresses sexual assault, this text stands apart due to its almost fantastical depiction of allyship—of central concern in this article—in Hermione's community. Here, allyship is nearly fantastical because it is divergently *visible*, at home and in public; these spaces are interconnected and rely on one another, and this solidarity moves across lines of gender and age. Simply, the sexual assault survivor protagonist, Hermione, and her queer best friend, Polly, are both surrounded by people willing to act as allies for them and to demonstrate solidarity. Thus, this story highlights relationships among characters engaged in processes of unsettling dominant power dynamics and patriarchal ideologies.

The story follows Hermione Winters, a high school cheerleader who is raped at summer camp after being drugged at a dance. She is found unconscious, "underwear gone . . . up to her waist in water, lying on rocks [lakeside]" (p. 58). Throughout the novel, Hermione grapples with the aftermath, including living in fear of not knowing her assailant, coping with frightening flashbacks, returning to school, and experiencing an unwanted pregnancy and consequent abortion as a result of rape. However, throughout her survivorship, Hermione never stands alone; her friends, family, and community rally around to offer support and solidarity in myriad ways, to the point that Hermione states, "I have trouble remembering that I'm a victim at all. That makes it hard to act like one" (p. 71). Hermione's best friend, Polly, is especially supportive throughout the story. She goes out of her way to act as an ally for Hermione—work that Hermione eventually tries to reciprocate when Polly comes out as a queer woman.

In this article, I contribute to a body of scholarship that examines how sexual assault is taken up in YAL (Altrows, 2016; Bott, 2006; Cleveland & Durand, 2014; Malo-Juvera, 2014; Marshall, 2009; Snider, 2014, among others). I argue that *Exit, pursued by a bear* uniquely portrays female adolescent friendships as sites of resistance, critical dialogue, support, survival, and allyship, particularly in response to sexual violence. The friend/ally/ship between Hermione and her queer best friend, Polly, functions as a space wherein their shared critical interrogation of rape culture effectively combats it. This novel is perhaps best understood as an exemplar tale; though imperfect, it offers to adolescent readers best practices for how they might act as allies, primarily for sexual assault survivors and secondarily for queer youth. To make this argument, I first draw from scholarship on ally work (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; DeTurk, 2011; Gaffney, 2016; Munin & Speight, 2010; Rich, 2003; Tasker, Peter, & Horn, 2014), most extensively from Hunt and Holmes's (2015) conception of "both/and" allyship as a way to understand how allyship can be fostered in fiction through female friendships that empower female characters, especially the survivor protagonist, to be agentic. Next, I engage with theories of social capital (Bourdieu, 2013; Yosso, 2005) to examine the

limits of such allyship, namely how this practice is not neutral and can reveal tensions that must also be attended to in an exploration of literary depiction of youth solidarity practices.

Allyship and the "Both/And" Approach

As Gaffney (2016) argues, "Being an ally means recognizing oppression broadly and standing in solidarity with anyone who experiences oppression, whether or not the ally also belongs to the targeted group" (p. 44). The type of allyship illustrated in *Exit, pursued by a bear* functions as an example of a "both/and" approach, for which Hunt and Holmes (2015) also advocate. Focused on decolonial allyship, particularly in relation to queer relationships and Indigenous cultures, they posit that a "both/and" approach honors "the intimate and often invisible practices" that exist in "home and family spaces" in connection with "other acts of solidarity . . . across much wider sociospatial contexts as well" (p. 167). This notion emerged from critically considering their own friendship, as both are "cisgender queer women, one of whom is Indigenous and one of whom is a white settler" (p. 154). Because activism is typically "seen" in public spaces, Hunt and Holmes explore their friendship and allyship as it unfolds in more private realms—within their friendship, homes, and family lives. Revealing that their friend/ally/ship is housed largely in "daily conversations and actions that seek to make space for [them]selves . . . families . . . and partners in the context of a racist, homophobic, and heteronormative patriarchy conditioned through colonialism" (p. 155), their article examines what a decolonial ally approach looks like in the everyday (p. 156).

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This conceptualization of allyship is useful when evaluating YAL, particularly stories where allyship is needed, such as in sexual assault narratives and stories involving queer characters and issues. How solidarity is portrayed (or not) is crucial, as these texts hold potentially influential power. As Rice (2013) argues, "Reading . . . books [about overcoming hardship] . . . can be the pivot point for moving from despair to hope" (p. 29), and ". . . injustices brought to light by books . . . expose issues impacting girls that are not commonly confronted but that adults well know exist" (p. 32). As such, the depiction of a "both/and" approach to allyship in *Exit, pursued by a bear* serves as a productive example of the value of the intimate geographies of adolescent friendships, particularly female friendships, as the characters avoid speaking "*for* . . . loved ones without their consent while also creating spaces in which [they] can be called on as allies when desired" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 168). Hermione and Polly practice such "both/and" allyship for one another and, in some cases, for others. However, it is also important to attend to how allyship is not a "neutral or uncomplicated" (p. 164) endeavor, as Hunt and Holmes remind us. Thus, the complex, dynamic unfolding representation of "both/and" allyship in *Exit, pursued by a bear* is powerful, if imperfect.

"What Polly and I have is forever": Allied "Soulmate" Friends in *Exit*

In *Exit, pursued by a bear*, allyship emerges discursively throughout Hermione's community and beyond. However, it is rooted most firmly in her friendship with Polly. As such, an overview of how female friendships are typically depicted in YAL provides a foundation for understanding how *Exit* stands apart; Polly functions as an intimate "star" ally, a kind of soulmate with near-animalistic protective instincts for Hermione, and attends to her role as ally quietly when necessary, even in the background of the story.

Fractured Female Friendships in YAL: A Legacy

Feminist theorists have long established the significance of close female bonds, particularly through work done in the 1970s through the 1990s (Murrenus Pilmaier, 2016, p. 150). As Adrienne Rich (2003) famously argued, "It is women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" (p. 33).

Certainly, "Female friendship is a critical community for most young women" (Hassel & Clasen, 2016, p. 9). Yet despite this, YAL unfortunately carries a legacy of producing unhealthy, reductive portrayals of female friendships. As Christian-Smith (1987) argues, "The way novels treat friendships between girls exemplifies selectivity, [and] there is often a breach in the relationship between best girlfriends" (p. 402). Further, as Suico (2016) discusses, such problematic depictions of female friendships remain prevalent in YAL, such as through contrasting character tropes wherein a dichotomy is often set up between a "good girl" and her foil, an "other girl" (p. 17). In such stories, girls are often combative, with the good girls being rewarded for their manners, self-restraint, chastity, and beauty, while the other girls are punished for their forwardness, promiscuousness, and cunning or manipulative ways. However, *Exit, pursued by a bear* provides great relief from this reductive literary device, as Hermione's female friendships, particularly her connection with Polly, are sources of happiness, solidarity, and support; rather than maligning each other, the girls consistently align themselves with one another.

Sexual Assault Survivors in YAL: *Speak* (1999) as a Case Study

As Bott (2006) argues, "Sex is always a controversial topic in young adult literature, with rape being one of the edgiest of topics. Trying to pretend rape does not exist is dangerously ignorant" (p. 26). As such, many scholars have taken up investigating the experiences of sexual assault survivors in YA literature, both in terms of literary analysis (see, for example, Altrows, 2016; Bickford, 2012; Detora, 2006; Hubler, 2017) and in the classroom (see, for example, Bickmore, 2008; Bott, 2006; Marshall, 2009).

Consider as a case study the critically acclaimed and widely taught novel *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson, a story about a survivor's struggle in the wake of her assault. Melinda, the protagonist, experiences silence and isolation, a stark contrast to Hermione in *Exit, pursued by a bear*. Many scholars have investigated the literary qualities of *Speak* (Ames, 2006; Day, 2013; Detora, 2006; Hubler, 2017; Latham, 2006; McGee, 2009; O'Quinn, 2001; Schiffman, 2012; Snider, 2014, among others), as well as student responses to this text (Alsup, 2003; Dykstra, 2013; Jackett, 2007; Malo-Juvera, 2014; McGee, 2009; Moore & Begoray, 2017; Park, 2012; Sprague, Keeling, & Lawrence, 2006; Tannert-Smith, 2010; Xu, 2008; Zigo & Derrico, 2008, among others). Hubler (2017) recently launched a discussion on rape in YA fiction by "credit[ing]" the novel "with propagating a feminist perspective on rape that young readers might not otherwise access" (p. 114). While many attest to the power of *Speak*, it is also important to confront that this story chronicles the painful experience of a survivor left to cope with the aftermath of rape, alone. Unlike Hermione, Melinda experiences ostracization by her peer group, neglect by her family, and even oversights by several teachers, resulting in her mutism "that is the real focus of the book . . . as she struggles with whether she should talk to someone, how she can talk, and exactly what she would say" (McGee, 2009, p. 173). Although Melinda does not disclose her rape until near the close of the novel, she is nevertheless visibly suffering throughout the story, and few individuals step up to actually speak to her, let alone exhibit ally behavior.

YAL unfortunately carries a legacy of producing unhealthy, reductive portrayals of female friendships.

For instance, in *Speak,* previous to Melinda's rape and the start of the book, her closest friend was Rachel Bruin, her now "ex-best friend" (p. 5), who Tannert-Smith (2010) describes as "the ex-friend who keeps changing shape" (p. 403). When we are first introduced to Rachel, she "has certainly grown up in the transition to high school: she is dating a senior, wears make-up, and hangs out with foreign exchange students (who noticeably increase her cool factor)" (Schiffman, 2012, unpaginated). It is also clear that she is no ally, or even acquaintance to, Melinda anymore, despite Melinda's clear need for Rachel to fill this role:

> Words climb up my throat. This was the girl who suffered through Brownies with me, who taught me how to swim, who understood about my parents, who didn't make fun of my bedroom. If there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it's Rachel. My throat burns. (p. 5)

We soon discover that these climbing, burning words are the testimony of Melinda's rape. However,

in the same moment that it is revealed how desperately Melinda craves a friend and ally like Polly in *Exit, pursued by a bear*, how she almost seems to expect it with her body's anticipatory physical reaction to seeing Rachel, Rachel's eyes meet Melinda's and she mouths, "I hate you" (p. 5), before turning her back. Rachel's anger toward Melinda continues throughout the novel so that she is not merely an ex-best friend, but rather a seething enemy. Melinda's comments attesting to this, such as, "Rachel might slit my throat on her new carpet" (p. 32), start to add up. Much later, when Melinda attempts to act as an ally for Rachel, to warn her when she starts dating Melinda's rapist, Rachel reacts with fury: "Liar! . . . You're jealous. You're a twisted little freak . . . you are so sick" (p. 184). Not even when Melinda is vindicated by her truth being made public does Rachel return to Melinda's life in a meaningful way; after "everyone [finds out] what happened," Melinda returns home to discover a mere "message on the machine from Rachel. She wants me to call her" (p. 297). As such, even though many scholars argue that the novel "ends on a high note," "with the protagonist speaking and brave, ready to talk about her rape" (Snider, 2014, p. 301), Melinda is still denied the allyship a survivor deserves, an allyship represented by Polly and Hermione's solidarity work in *Exit, pursued by a bear*.

Allies are few and far between for YA rape survivors, which is what makes *Exit* and its protagonist, Hermione, so refreshing and hopeful.

Therefore, while much scholarship examines the experiences of sexual assault survivors in YA fiction, many investigations address the all-too-common experiences of lonely, isolated protagonists. Allies are few and far between for YA rape survivors, which is what makes *Exit* and its protagonist, Hermione, so refreshing and hopeful.

Polly as Star Ally: The Exemplar Character for Acts of Solidarity

Many characters act as allies for Hermione. Her "constellation of intimates" (Bergman, 2013, p. 31) includes parents, teammates, her cheerleading coach, police officers, healthcare workers, neighbors, teachers, and a reverend, who all show solidarity and offer help in myriad ways. Hermione even senses a kinship with the ghost of Clara Abbey, a deceased drunk driving victim, whom she imagines speaking to her at several moments in the text. However, Polly stands apart from this supportive crowd. Hermione makes it clear from the outset that despite having a boyfriend, her true soulmate is Polly, her "superhero" (p. 112), claiming, "What Polly and I have is forever" (p. 43). Hermione and Polly's connection remains unwavering, with Polly immediately becoming Hermione's champion as ally after the rape, protecting Hermione from others, as well as (potentially) from Hermione herself. For instance, early on, Polly threatens Hermione's boyfriend when he is disrespectful to Hermione: "Get your ass to your cabin . . . if I *ever* hear you talk like that about any girl . . . I will skin you" (p. 38). Later, when Hermione wakes up in the hospital following her rape, Polly "[does]n't let go of [her] hand" (pp. 51, 67). However, one of the more outstanding examples of Polly's loyalty occurs after a reporter victim-blames Hermione while interviewing Hermione and Polly about cheerleading; the reporter deviates from her line of questioning to address Hermione's sexual assault. Polly, "practically on fire," challenges: "You wouldn't think to ask a boy how he would avoid raping someone?" Hermione observes that she's "never seen a grown up recoil like this" and that the reporter "rocks back as if Polly had struck her" (p. 194).

This moment is important in two central respects. First, together the girls co-construct a space to combat rape culture in challenging the reporter's offensive, problematic line of questioning, often seen in contemporary media; as Gravelin (2016) argues, "by blaming victims . . . media may be promoting a rape-tolerant culture" (p. 58). Next, because Polly as ally refrains from dominating the situation, Polly resists speaking "*for* her loved one" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 168). Instead, she helps to facilitate Hermione's agentic self-advocacy, demonstrated at the beginning and conclusion of this exchange. As the interview commences, Hermione can "feel Polly start to boil over and then rein herself in," because Polly "mak[es] [her] take the lead" (p. 193). After Polly's retort, Hermione feels a wave of empowerment; it "gives [her] balance, like Polly has caught [her] out of the air and put [her] on

[her] feet again" (p. 194). Hermione is then able to exercise agency by drawing the interview to a close, issuing a warning to the reporter: "Your article had better not have anything other than . . . quotes about cheerleading in it. I can start a letter-writing campaign like you wouldn't believe" (pp. 194–195).

Here, similar to the way Hunt and Holmes (2016) describe their own connection, Hermione and Polly's "friendship develop[s] through undertaking collaborative action to foster . . . conversation about violence [and] gender" (p. 161). Ultimately, these moments exemplify how Polly is an intimate ally for Hermione, "willing to take action, either interpersonally or in larger social settings . . . mov[ing] beyond self-regulation or prejudice" (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2212). Overall, their friendship functions as a space wherein critical interrogation significantly contributes to challenging rape culture, in that their resistance might encourage the reporter (whose position holds a degree of influence) to reconsider her thinking about and treatment of sexual assault issues.

Animal Ally Instincts: Polly's Ferociously Protective Nature

Polly's protective nature and intuition regarding what kind of support Hermione needs often appear to the reader as almost instinctual reflexes. For example, when Hermione reveals that the first time she thought of herself as "broken," Polly would not "let" her (p. 81); all Hermione needs is to look at Polly to "forget[] [she] is damaged" (p. 84). Though such instances of self-blame and doubt are rare, due to Hermione's clear sense of self and the ally support she receives, Polly nevertheless quickly intervenes to empower her to avoid thinking poorly of herself. In fact, Polly's consistently fierce protectiveness can almost be characterized as animalistic; she is truly a "fighting bear," their school's mascot and cheerleading focus. As Ronnberg and Martin (2011) argue, the bear has numerous symbolic possibilities, such as being representative of a "spiritual helper" or "mythic hero"; the bear is also associated with "healing powers" alongside its "wild and massive," "immensely powerful" nature (p. 272). Further, early on, Polly is described as "a thing of fearsome beauty" (p. 47)—"all teeth and ferocity" (p. 119), "eat[ing] fear for breakfast" (p. 147). In this way, Polly uses her intensity and outrage at Hermione's rape, both creatively and generatively, to enhance Hermione's ability to cope and to make her feel protected during the fallout following her assault. Returning to Rich (2003), Polly's ferocity in her friendship to Hermione is arguably an example of how their allied soulmate bond is something of a "survival relationship," demonstrating how "women . . . must be one another's allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival" (p. 36).

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Allyship, Even When No One Is Looking: Polly's Solidarity Work behind the Scenes

Polly endeavors to act as a good friend and ally to Hermione behind the scenes, fulfilling the "need for support to occur both when . . . people are present and when they are not" (Brown & Ostrove, 2013, p. 2212). This begins even at the beginning of the novel, before Hermione is cognizant that she has been raped; she awakens in the hospital to see Polly's face, "so white" (p. 51) because Polly stayed with her all night. Then, when the girls return to school in the fall, Polly works to ensure that Hermione's transition following the attack is as smooth as possible, including shutting down Jenny, a teammate spreading rumors about Hermione's attack because of her own insecurities. When Hermione confronts her, Jenny makes excuses for herself with, "It was just that I *knew* something . . . [usually] no one's interested in what I have to say." When Jenny assures Hermione that she "has [her] back, now," Hermione immediately knows without asking that this is because "Polly [already] threatened [her]" (p. 92).

Polly is also mindful of ensuring that Hermione feels physically safe at school, "sav[ing] a seat in the classes [they] have together" (p. 98). Such tireless efforts to make starting the school year as painless as possible for Hermione do not go unnoticed by the adults in their lives, either; when Hermione visits the guidance counselor to discuss her sexual assault, the

counselor remarks, "If I had a friend like Polly Olivier, I'd probably have done more dueling in my youth" (p. 101).

"I will spend the rest of my life making this up to her": Ally Work and Reciprocity

As Vaquera and Kao (2008) argue, reciprocity is a quality of friendship often assumed: "In general, reciprocity is one of the expectations about affective relations"; however, "not all friendships are created equal, and certainly not all friendships are reciprocal by default" (p. 55). *Exit* extends beyond functioning as an excellent example of how "not all friendships are created equal." Indeed, Hermione and Polly's relationship exemplifies how powerful reciprocity can be between friends and allies. In *Exit, pursued by a bear,* friend/ally/ship is not unilateral; rather, reciprocal ally work moves back and forth between characters consistently, demonstrating that "allies exist across identity lines" (Gaffney, 2016, pp. 43–44). These "dynamics of solidarity across . . . interconnected identities and positionalities" (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 163) are central to this story as Hermione and Polly endeavor to consistently reciprocate compassion and solidarity. This duo demonstrates through friend/ally/ship hooks' (2015) emphasis on how "bonds of care and commitment" emerge in contexts of reciprocity to "enable[] sustained love . . . [that allows] men and women to nurture one another, to grow fully and freely" (p. 131).

Following her rape, Hermione does not merely sit back to "collect" the support she is "owed." Rather, she continues her ally work, especially when Polly comes out as gay.

The Ally Athlete

From the beginning, Hermione is established as an ally figure, particularly for her younger cheerleading teammates during cheer summer camp; this is evidenced when she chastises herself for not remembering a name, telling herself "that's inexcusable. I have to be better" (p. 2). Later, an especially telling moment unfolds when Hermione decides to give a controversial speech to her team during an annual cheer camp bonfire, without advance permission from her coaches to dive into the risky subject matter. Risking punitive repercussions, she reminds everyone to be sexually safe, explicitly addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy. When her boyfriend, a fellow cheerleader, criticizes her efforts because she "basically told everyone that girls shouldn't have sex," she defends herself by saying, "I told everyone to be careful" (p. 28).

Hermione consistently encourages her teammates to work together throughout the novel, stressing the importance of supportive group dynamics. Repeatedly, Hermione productively taps into her social capital as realized in her linguistic capital—the "intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78)—as a head cheerleader and stresses the necessity of solidarity. Using what Yosso (2005) chronicles as qualities of linguistic capital, including "attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume" (p. 79) and so forth, Hermione successfully urges her team to "come together and solve . . . problems" (p. 11) during training; she is confident that she is leading a team that "has her back" (p. 36). As such, she fosters an atmosphere in which being supportive and good to those around you is paramount.

Authoring a Straight Ally Identity

Following her rape, Hermione does not merely sit back to "collect" the support she is "owed." Rather, she continues her ally work, especially when Polly comes out as gay. As Hunt and Holmes (2015) argue, "friendships can provide opportunities for enacting allyship and a decolonial queer praxis, while raising questions about reciprocity and accountability across axes of difference" (p. 161), and Hermione seizes such an opportunity. In fact, Hermione is horrified at herself for being "too self-involved to notice [that Polly is gay]," calling it the most "selfish," "worst thing" she's ever done in her life; she is so distraught that she immediately "vomit[s] all over the floor" (p. 155). Hermione's intense reaction to Polly's coming out is perhaps a response to her "realization of otherness," where she "came face-to-face with the realization of the Other (an outgroup member or oppressed member of society)" (Munin & Speight, 2010, p. 257).

Munin and Speight (2010) argue that this realization is pivotal for potential allies, as it shows them a "worldview apart from their privilege" (p. 257). From this moment, Hermione seizes the opportunity to act as a straight ally for Polly, who is concerned about coming out to her community and family.

Hermione's eagerness to act as ally for Polly is clearly illustrated by her disappointment in not being invited to Polly's coming-out discussion with her parents. This is the first time Polly is going to address her sexuality with them, and she wants to do so independently, by herself, and without the physical support of Hermione's presence. Such a disappointed reaction demonstrates Hermione's "desire to do something or to be changed through a shared experience and knowledge"; she is keen to be active in a "friendship of solidarity that honors and celebrates" (Hunt & Holmes, 2016, p. 161) Polly's queer identity. However, despite feeling hurt, Hermione recognizes the importance of knowing her place as an ally and respecting boundaries, much like Polly did when she held back during the fiery exchange with the victim-blaming reporter.

Hermione understands that Polly needs to be in control when Hermione reciprocates acts of allyship. Drawing from her own experiences, Hermione chronicles: "I'm not there when Polly comes out to her parents. That hurts a bit, but I know what it's like to do something alone, so I can't really hold a grudge" (p. 186). Hermione's musing that she thought she'd "be able to control [her own] ending" signals that she especially understands the importance of people controlling their own experiences, whether that be a healing process in the aftermath of sexual assault or a process of bravery with coming out to one's family. Furthermore, regardless of Hermione's absence during Polly's family meeting, Polly "still calls . . . almost every night before . . . bed" (p. 186), demonstrating an ongoing chain of supportive discussions. Overall, the girls' constellation of conversations becomes a site of change, growth, and strengthened understanding. Certainly, "it is in these intimate acts of reciprocity that . . . relationships with allyship are formed" (Hunt & Holmes, 2016, p. 163).

"I've been . . . pretty lousy . . . in terms of reciprocation": Ally Work and Self-reflection

Gaffney (2016) argues that while there is "no blueprint" for acting as an ally, "being effective requires significant self-reflection" (p. 44). Hunt and Holmes (2015) also argue that reflexivity is a critical piece in ally work; without it, we risk creating problematic tensions. Hermione is consistently mindful about both receiving and providing acts of solidarity. Of course, Hermione always makes notes of Polly's exhaustive efforts to make her feel safe and supported, such as telling Polly, "You are the best ever," then admonishing herself with "I don't tell her that enough" (p. 65). However, Hermione's self-reflection in her ally work is perhaps best illustrated after Polly comes out to her. In response, Hermione is cautious at many junctures, ready to show support while being mindful to note when to back away and respect Polly's boundaries as she explores this aspect of her identity more publicly for the first time.

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Self-policing Ally Work

One of the first instances where Hermione demonstrates self-reflective ally work occurs in the minutes following Polly coming out to her. Hermione immediately demonstrates mindful cautiousness; because the conversation happens at Hermione's home, she is careful to keep it hidden. She "check[s] on [her] parents, who are migrating towards the living room, and then leans over to Polly" (p. 160) before speaking, so the adults do not hear the girls' conversation. Next, in remembering her promise to her psychiatrist to always tell him the truth during her post-rape therapy, she self-admonishes: "Shit . . . so I kind of promised [Dr. Hutt] I would tell him the truth, which means theoretically I have to tell him about you. But he's really good at the confidentiality thing" (p. 160). As such, Hermione is sure to gain Polly's blessing, studying her reaction closely to ensure "there is nothing insincere" (p. 160) in her granting of permission.

Hermione is especially self-reflective in how she presents herself as an ally to Polly's budding romance with fellow teammate, Amy, when the three of them spend time together. Hermione carefully considers

how her presence might impact their romantic dynamic and self-monitors accordingly. As an example, the first time they all hang out socially after Hermione is told about their relationship, she admits feeling "very, very intrusive" (p. 165), demonstrating her inner struggle while navigating her new straight ally identity. However, "Polly sits down beside Amy and takes her hand like they're the only two people in the room" (p. 165), reassuring Hermione that her presence does not interfere with their intimacy. This display of affection signals that Hermione is successfully presenting herself as an ally. Further, Hermione endeavors to observe and admire their romance, calling it "the sweetest thing I have ever seen in my life . . ." (p. 166). Later, at the school dance, Hermione notices when another friend, Brenda, "links arms with [Hermione]," which "makes it look totally natural when Polly links arms with Amy" (p. 167), and they all go into the dance together. This demonstrates Hermione's attention to even the micro-gestures that she can enact to support Polly. In this way, Hermione carefully attends to the business of ally work in a manner that is observant, thoughtful, and reflexive.

Hermione builds on her ally work by engaging in LGBTQ-affirming behavior through voicing or demonstrating support for Polly in a number of moments

Engaging in LGBTQ-Affirming Behavior

Hermione also engages in LGBTQ-affirming behavior, specifically "voicing support" (Poteat, 2015, p. 1494), illustrating how peers can indeed be "a major source for connection and support during adolescence" (p. 1495). As Poteat (2015) argues, critical thinking coupled with self-reflection "may be crucial for engaging in affirming behavior because, as dominant group members, heterosexuals may not otherwise recognize heterosexual privilege" (p. 1495). Hermione builds on her ally work by engaging in LGBTQ-affirming behavior through voicing or demonstrating support for Polly in a number of moments.

One such instance occurs when Polly and Amy sleep over at Hermione's home. Hermione is careful to make them feel comfortable sleeping close together in her presence. She uses humor as a tool in an effort to mitigate Amy's anxiety about the situation, since Hermione "can't tell if she's worried about [Hermione] being crowded or being a third wheel" (p. 175). Hermione sympathizes, reflecting that Amy's concerns are "fair" because she's "not sure either," so she endeavors to break the tension with teasing: "I'm sleeping on the edge [of the bed], and I'm not sharing a mattress with Polly. She kicks" (p. 175). As a result, there is "a lot of laughing [during] . . . final preparations for bed" (p. 175).

Hermione continues to pay attention to how, for the rest of the night, the girls "keep their hands *mostly* to themselves" (my emphasis; p. 175), demonstrating that Hermione's indirect voicing of support for them to not only date but also to physically express their relationship is having an impact. Further, Hermione critically reflects on her actions, wondering if maybe she should have "insisted they sleep at Polly's house instead" (p. 175), so that they might have more privacy to be more intimate. Thus, Hermione supports not only their emotional romantic connection, but also their sexual expressions, even as she herself grapples with the notion of sex in the wake of her rape, wondering if "maybe someday I'll be able to have sex with someone" (p. 176).

"I love every person in this room": Ally Work Is Not Neutral

As Hunt and Holmes (2015) argue, allyship is always "fraught with tensions," as it is "not a neutral or uncomplicated process" (p. 164). Allies risk reproducing oppressive dynamics, such as leaving privilege unchecked, if they are not mindful. Therefore, a matter to be considered is the characters' positionalities and the extent to which social capital enables Hermione and Polly to be 1) allies and 2) in positions to be so supported by allies. To begin with, they possess a number of "dominant/agent identities" (DeTurk, 2011, p. 565), as both are white, cisgender, and able-bodied; where they differ is in sexuality, which is revealed over halfway through the text when Polly comes out. As a result of their positionalities, they both have access to build significant social capital. Yosso (2005) describes social capital as "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional

support" (p. 79). Such capital is, of course, fraught with power; as Bourdieu (2013) argues, "Any capital, whatever form it assumes, exerts a symbolic violence as soon as it is recognized" (p. 298). Therefore, social capital is critical when considering the near-fantastical level of allyship in this story.

On Being a Popular Ally: Self-confidence and Social Capital

In many of their relationships, Hermione and Polly are in "power-over" positions with their peers as co-head, senior cheerleaders with outgoing personalities who are incredibly popular; such status increases their capacity for acting as allies. A standout example of this is how both girls only rarely need to assert their influence; rather, the novel is filled with moments illustrated by this scene: "Without a word, [Mallory] gives . . . captains choice of top bunk [at cheer camp]" (p. 9). This is because they possess a popularity that is described by Hermione as "pretty much made of Teflon" (p. 159). Accordingly, they are keenly aware of the power they hold and use it for effect; when Hermione makes a speech to the entire cheerleading camp, "everyone's eyes are locked on [her]," so she "drop[s]" her voice to near "whispering" for dramatic effect and can "feel the whole camp lean towards [her]" (p. 22).

This moment is especially indicative of the centrality of self-confidence, "a necessary precursor to ally development" and a quality that allows allies to "persevere during times of difficulty" (Munin & Speight, 2010, pp. 259–260). As DeTurk (2011) notes, "Self-described allies suggest . . . that a commitment to being an ally is experienced as an important element of identity" (p. 570). As such, when Hermione first returns to school with trepidation following her rape, Polly "cuts her off," reminding her that she is "devastatingly popular, which means everyone will be talking about [her]" (p. 79). Polly insists that Hermione return to maintain control of her social capital.

Polly's identity is tied to this moment in two manners; as two halves of the co-head cheerleader duo, Hermione and Polly share an identity as a unit of co-captains, and so Polly's identity, and therefore reputation, is tied to Hermione's behavior. Second, Polly's identity as an ally here is being challenged in a sense; if she "fails" to empower Hermione and to support her "enough" to convince her to return to school, then her important ally identity is compromised. Though Hermione momentarily wavers on her decision to return to school, considering "I think I'd be a lot more noticeable if I'm sick at school" (p. 80), with Polly's encouragement, she returns. This supports the findings of Munin and Speight's (2010) study on factors that influence college students' development in becoming allies; they concluded that "crucial aspects" were specific qualities of personality, including "extroversion, leadership, and empathy . . . . [S]ince being an ally is a social endeavor, the participants' extroverted natures enabled them to translate constant interactions with others into a renewable source of personal energy" (p. 259).

Allies risk reproducing oppressive dynamics, such as leaving privilege unchecked, if they are not mindful.

Allies and Access: A Close Reading of the Abortion Scene

Perhaps the most telling illustration of how allyship is not neutral work is Hermione's abortion experience, since the rape resulted in pregnancy. To begin with, the ease with which Hermione accesses an abortion is clear; she knows that she has the option to choose which clinic will best suit her needs: "There were other clinics, closer clinics, but I picked the one with the best reputation. Also, I picked the one that was closest to the lab where they will be testing the DNA" (p. 133). She researches clinics as far as two hours away, knowing that an ally will drive her wherever she chooses.

Further, the police officer who worked on Hermione's case continues to act as both an exemplary ally and investigator by personally delivering the DNA sample, driving hours to ensure that the materials are properly handled. Certainly, police in rape cases do not usually demonstrate this attention to detail and extraordinary measures. Indeed, much research has uncovered how police commonly engage in "hurtful," "disbelieving, victim-blaming reactions to adult rape victims" (Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2016, p. 91). Greeson, Campbell, and Fehler-Cabral's study on adolescents' experiences with police after reporting sexual assault was "mixed" (p. 105): "A common description was that the police made the adolescents

feel like they, the victim, had done something wrong" (p. 96). Thus, Officer Plummer's attentive allyship is certainly unique.

Hermione is also armed with the choice to select which of her many allies will accompany her. Though her mother wants to accompany her, and despite how Hermione can see that "it kills her" (p. 132) to stay behind, perhaps unsurprisingly, Hermione requests Polly's presence. Regardless, everyone around Hermione supports her decision to abort; no one intervenes to discourage or shame her choice. This is even surprisingly apparent when Hermione discusses it with her reverend, another ally, who "doesn't flinch or hesitate on the word ['abortion']" when he asks, "You're going out of town for the abortion?" with a face "empty of both judgment and pity" (p. 129). Most notably, when she arrives at the clinic, no protesters are present and the staff is professional. Because of this, her primary ally, Polly, is able to support her in a safe, welcoming space called The Women's Health Clinic that she notes is full of many "plants and lots of natural light" (p. 134).

Perhaps the most telling illustration of how allyship is not neutral work is Hermione's abortion experience, since the rape resulted in pregnancy.

However, it is in the scene leading up to and then following her abortion that interestingly reveals how allyship is fraught with tensions. For instance, Hermione notes that a "very pretty" Indian girl dressed in a "perfect sari" (p. 135) is waiting, sandwiched between her parents. They are described as "very stiff in their seats" (p. 135), perhaps suggesting that cultural norms are differently impacting this girl's abortion experience. Abortion has been legal in India since 1971; however, "medical practitioners . . . perform abortions under strict conditions," and there is an "arbitrary 20 week cut off" that can "compel women to make ill-informed decisions" (Datar, 2015, p. 1). Because this story takes place in Canada, it cannot be assumed that these Indian parents are disapproving or unsupportive; indeed, they are at the clinic with their daughter, which can be interpreted as allyship. Further, if they are upset, it might simply be because their daughter is about to have an intense experience. However, Hermione senses that this is not the case; she is so uncomfortable that she looks away to "focus on the clipboard" (p. 135).

Parental allies are crucial to an individual's ability to act as an ally. As Munin and Speight (2010) note, "Parents . . . heavily impact[] ally development" (p. 261) and can be an important part of a supportive community (p. 262). Further, Tasker, Peter, and Horn (2014) argue that "parental attitudes constitute a critical pathway through which young people may be able to effect change" (p. 299). Parental support is also an example of "familial capital" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80), and certainly Hermione's parents provide such capital as they are consistently supportive and loving. For instance, her father is cautious about touching Hermione immediately following her assault: "He's afraid that if he touches me, I'll forget that he's my dad, not my rapist" (p. 82), signaling her father's keen awareness of potential triggering or further traumatization.

Relatedly, Hermione notes that all of the adults in her life are sensitive to the risk of further traumatization; in fact, she reveals that in all the time between her attack and meeting her family doctor, she "do[esn't]t think [she's] been alone with a male person since . . . [being] raped. Everyone is so considerate" (pp. 108–109). Thus, it is arguably reasonable to infer that Hermione's parents would be supportive of Hermione getting an abortion regardless of the reason, while the Indian girl's parents might be read as tense and disapproving. As such, Hermione's specific type of social capital, her familial capital, empowers her with a strong sense of community (Yosso, 2005, p. 79), which greatly contributes to both her healing process as well as her ability to turn around and act as an ally herself for others, namely Polly.

The scene immediately following Hermione's abortion is especially indicative of how allyship is certainly not neutral. Hermione sits in recovery with a "skinny woman," "the Indian girl," "a woman covered in tattoos," and "then a woman who hasn't smiled in a decade. Then a woman. Then a woman. And we all sit there and stare at the floor" (p. 138). The detail of all their downcast eyes "star[ing] at the floor" certainly suggests a number of responses—shame, fatigue, contemplation, and so forth. Marshall (2010) argues that "eyes open and downcast" are "veiled" (p. 354), suggesting that they are perhaps engaging in acts of

self-protection. Ultimately, each woman seems to be taking a moment to uniquely process her abortion. Without warning, the "woman with tattoos" breaks the silence to comment that soon she is "going to have the coldest beer you can possibly imagine" (p. 138); at that point, each woman takes a turn to reveal what creature comfort she plans to indulge in. However, the Indian girl breaks the mood; instead of planning for "beer," "ice cream," or "Bailey's," she offers, "I asked to see it . . . it didn't look like a person . . . I did the right thing" (p. 138). Immediately, the women offer words of support such as "Yes honey . . . you did the right thing" (p. 138). In contrast, Hermione remains silent.

Though Hermione silently reflects that she is "surrounded by people who are united" and that she has "never felt anything like this," "such a kinship," and that she "loves every person in this room" (p. 138), her silence speaks volumes. Although the women behave in a united fashion, it does not represent equity of experiences. Hermione knows she will return to her community, family, and friends supported; however, it is suggested that the others, especially the Indian girl, might not. Hermione's silence is telling because it suggests that Hermione does not need to participate in this exchange of affirmation and support; she doesn't need any more female friends. Validation in this space is not necessary for Hermione, who has access to an entire army of allies who can do this work for her, both in private and in public realms. Indeed, she may already be rich in "aspirational capital"—"the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yet, for the others, this semi-private space might be the only one where they find this kind of "kinship" and "love" (p. 138); this might be their only space for "coalition building" (Holmes & Hunt, 2015, p. 157). Further, Hermione's choice to remain silent instead of being self-reflective and reciprocal here is curious, as she has demonstrated these qualities previously within her own community. Unfortunately, this marks a missed opportunity for a "cross-cultural [connection]," to participate in a "friendship . . . requir[ing] trust and communication across differences, challenging . . . and creating solidarity" (p. 161). As such, Hermione fails to be "account[able]" (p. 162), especially as a member of the dominant group.

Conclusion

It is critical to remember that Hermione and Polly's abilities to author themselves as friends standing in solidarity are largely influenced by and depend on their subject positions as privileged individuals who have significant access to building incredible social capital (Bourdieu, 2013; Yosso, 2005). As such, their abilities to function as allies are powered by their privilege, demonstrating that ally work is far from neutral. However, despite this, *Exit* consistently demonstrates that "friendships can provide opportunities for enacting allyship" (Holmes & Hunt, 2015, p. 161).

Hermione's choice to remain silent instead of being self-reflective and reciprocal here is curious, as she has demonstrated these qualities previously within her own community.

Hermione and Polly chiefly engage in ally work that is personal, self-reflective, and reciprocal, signaling that their strong female friendship is a site for empowerment and resistance against rape culture, a system that "condones and contributes to the ongoing sexual victimization of women and girls, while minimizing the responsibility of rapists" (Greeson, Campbell, & Fehler-Cabral, 2016, p. 91). As Gruber (2016) argues, "rape culture" is a term so "expansive[] and slippery"—pointing to everything from "brutal sexual assaults to jokes about sex"—that it is nearly "unhelpful. . . . [W]e are all part of it, it is terrible, and we need to do something—anything—to eradicate it" (p. 1028). Indeed, "almost everyone has been touched by rape culture" (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi). Consider North America alone; in Canada, the pervasiveness of rape is "astounding" (Lauridsen & Everall, 2013, p. 109), and in America, president Donald Trump engaged in sexual violence described in "a viral video of [his] patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic commentary," and he further continues to "relentlessly decry survivors" (Griffin, 2017, p. 141). As such, studying friend/ally/ships such as Hermione and Polly's in the critical literacy classroom might open up possibilities for modeling ally behavior as a strategy for combating rape culture.

As DeTurk (2011) argues, such behavior includes providing concrete support as well as comforting and validating comments, being visible as an ally, using authority appropriately, initiating dialogue, questioning gently, responding in the moment, and/or waiting for appropriate moments to provide support. All these items displayed by Hermione and Polly for one another function to challenge sexual victimization in rape culture and hold potential for creating access points for discussions about rape culture in school. Unfortunately, such a friendship is rarely depicted in YAL; as a result, close bonds in *Exit, pursued by a bear* provide a unique and necessary example of how YAL female characters can be portrayed as significant and transformative influences for one another.

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